

HOW TO DEAL WITH OUR LONDON POOR.

I am a clergyman's wife, residing in a parish of the N. W. District, and consequently I have some experience of parochial visiting and the feelings and habits of the London poor. Some little time ago I read with much interest a well written paper, entitled "How to Deal with our Rural Poor," in one of the earlier numbers of *Once a Week*.^{*} The writer there conveyed several useful hints as to the treatment of the poor in our country villages at the hands of those who are among them as masters and friendly neighbours, and therefore I venture to note down a few remarks on the condition of my own people, and a few ideas which have dawned upon my mind bearing upon their interests.

Those who have visited much among the London poor must have often been disconcerted at their inability to reform and redress the sufferings of a family where there are a bad father and sickly mother, and several young children, all demanding, in both a bodily and spiritual sense, such relief as will preserve them from starvation. In our own parish we have a goodly band of district visitors, acting under the countenance . and guidance of our clergy. These distribute tickets for money, meat, and bread, according to the exigencies of the several cases, and their services are essential to the supervisors of our London districts, both as spiritual assistants and as almoners of our local charity. But yet these cannot do all that could and might be done for the poor. Money and food will pay the back rents and sustain the body, but how are they to clothe the poor little shivering children in winter, or in long sickness, when rags are pawned for the rent and food and firing, work being slack or at a stand still for weeks together, and any means of livelihood precarious. From all I have seen and the conversations I have held with our poor women, I have come to the conclusion that we can materially assist large families by a simple method, devised at little expense to us women, one which involves the clothing of these large families by one hour's needlework in our own homes.

^{*} See vol. VII., p. 64.

We have in most, if not in all, of our London parishes working committees once a week or once in a month; but there is a very large proportion of well-disposed girls and older persons among the higher classes who do not care to attend them. Home occupations and party prejudices sometimes deter them from joining this sisterhood of labourers; but I believe these young women would gladly contribute their needlework

to the benefit of the poor did they but know how to set about it. It is more especially to them and others who are not able to visit the hovels of the London poor that I would submit the consideration of my little plan, one which has at least the merit of having been found to work well in practice.

It is not necessary, let me tell my lady readers, to buy all the materials for clothing the poor. Only a small outlay is requisite, and it need not exceed a couple of pounds yearly. In the first place, you can tell your linen draper who usually supplies you with calico, printed cambrics, &c., to procure some cotton patchwork. This is sold by the pound, and is not very expensive. In addition to these pieces, he will probably, at your request, permit his assistants to save some of the fag ends. These fag-ends are the beginnings and ends of all manufactured goods, such as calicos, cambrics, flannels, &c. In many cases they serve to show the name of the manufacturer, or the number for future orders, or the quantity of yards in each piece, and though perfectly use less to the shopkeeper, will be of great service in making clothes for the poor.

If you tell him you require them for a charitable purpose, he will doubtless put with them any small pieces of faded goods he may have that would be useless to any one else. Remnants of all sorts for little frocks and coloured petticoats can be purchased at a most reasonable price, wherever you may deal. I recommend you to work solely on children's clothing, as these fag-ends will seldom serve for larger garments. Little hands, moreover, might become coarse and expand (which is not desirable) over rougher and larger work, like women's aprons and flannel petticoats. Those can be made at our Dorcas meetings, and sold or given away upon a regular organised system. The list and strips of flannel which you will find among these pieces make beautiful flannel petticoats, and I know that they last as long as those made out of a piece. In the patch work which you buy you will find good-sized patterns of cotton print, many of them of the same size and cut evenly. These make up splendid counterpanes for old women. They should be neatly run together and the hems or edges herring-boned. I consider this tidier and prettier than the old fashion of sewing the bits together and leaving raw edges on the wrong side. When completed, the whole looks very neat and pretty, and requires no lining. If you prefer a lining, it must be a loose one, of thin calico or holland, as it is difficult to wash patchwork counterpanes with a thick quilted lining, and I know the poor old women find them too heavy to wash when made up in this fashion.

The prettiest work of all is the flannel petticoats. These should be made thus : — The strips of flannel should be run together and herring-boned down on the wrong side,

like the counterpanes. When completed they are very neat. The stripes in the flannel make them look pretty and compact, particularly if run together with taste. The strips must be run round and not downwards. One strip and a half will make the circumference of a small petticoat. An unpleasant odour will be at first scented in the new flannel; this can be remedied by placing a tablet of almond soap among the flannel strips a day or two before you touch the work. A little fluff may also fall upon your dress in the course of this needlework. I would, therefore, recommend you to wear for the time a large linen apron, which will protect your things from everything obnoxious in this respect. A young child at the same time might sit at your side and tear up waste clean paper for the mattresses and pillows for the poor.

These mattresses, when well made, serve as admirable beddings for the sick and infant: among the poor, who have often nothing better than sacks filled with shavings to lie upon. They should be made thus : — The paper must be torn up into a basket which will not tip over. It must first of all be folded, and then be torn towards one's self, in the seams, into strips; each strip should be torn into bits no larger than half a postage stamp. One thing is necessary to be observed in this part of the work — the paper must never be torn double, and each bit must drop separately into the basket. There will be lumps for ever in the pillow or bedding should you neglect this caution. I have found out to my cost that, though you may shake the basket of bits, when they are thrown in doubled together they don't divide, and you put lumps into the case of linen or ticking, or whatever you prefer for the same pillow or mattress. No bits with sealing wax or gum upon them, such as some portions of an envelope, should ever be dropped in, neither any coloured paper, because poisons are now and then used in their tints by the manufacturers, in the same way as arsenic is employed in the colouring of green muslin. I have been told by a good authority in the matter that newspaper stuffing is healthy, on account of printers' ink being peculiarly wholesome. For my own part I should prefer a pillow or mattress made of one sort of paper, either all newspaper and printed forms, such as circulars and clean old book sheets, or letter paper. Your friends might tear up the letters which they do not wish to preserve, and contribute with advantage to your waste-paper basket. Save the half blank sheets of letters; these are useful to the poor for the making out of bills and for occasional correspondence with absent relations.

At a trifling expense a few little chimney ornaments may be purchased at the Portland Bazaar or elsewhere for the amusement of some of the decrepit old people. The poor are strangely fond of these toys, as also of rude pictures of sacred subjects. Pictures out of old books, cut out and pasted on a yard of holland, bound with tape, and rolled

up and fastened with a button and buttonhole, will be a boon to many a poor child as well as mother. I am desirous of impressing upon those who feel willing to work in concert with others and myself, according to our simple plan, the necessity for this sort of needlework in many districts. Money and food tickets sustain the body, but don't clothe the shivering infants. Mothers have no time to make clothes for their little ones; and poor parents, I may say, have generally large families. The little creatures wear out their clothes as fast as and faster than our own children do theirs. They require continual washing, mending, and making for. How is it possible for the mothers to work for bread and make up coats for eight in family at the same time, "with one pair of hands," as is then- own expression, " to do it all! "

The larger part of the poor women in Lon don get a living by charing and laundry work. The wages of the husband will not pay the six shillings rent for two rooms, and the schooling of two or three boys and girls, and " keep the wolf from the door " as well. The wife, then, must go out to work also. A mechanic, working for the shops in his own neighbourhood, or for those at the West End, makes from 18s. to 11. per week; a labourer the same sum. This leaves but a small surplus for clothes, I as sure you, if any at all, after the rent is paid and the food consumed at the end of the week. I know as a fact that most wives who are too delicate, or are unable for other reasons to go out to work, never eat meat themselves, and they and their children mainly subsist on bread and dripping, treacle-water, and tea. Sometimes a luxury is improvised in the way of a herring, or an ounce or two of salt butter and a herring. This I know to be the fare of a poor family who, out of 11. 5s. per week, have 6s. 6d. rent to pay, and to sup port five young children. The poor man must eat one good meal of meat now and then in the week, as his health would decline for want of proper nourishment, and his work would flag woefully in consequence. On the return of the wives from the wash-tub or charing they have only time to wash their children and put them to bed. All day some of the children have been at the ragged or national schools; perhaps one boy has been carrying about newspapers, and parcels, or doctor's medicines, for 3s. 6 d. per week; another has had the care of the baby, as well as a small child, and has spent his time on different doorsteps, exposed to the temptation of marbles, pitch and toss, and countless perils to himself and charges in street affrays and melses of different kinds throughout the day. He is probably ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-mannered, because he cannot be spared to go to school.

On Saturday the mother usually stays at home if she have no big daughter " to do her house up," and washes up everything in her two rooms — house, clothes, children, and her self poor thing, — in order that she and her family may be decent on Sunday, and

start afresh to labour for their livelihood on Monday. We never choose Saturday for our visiting day, as we have some scruples in intruding on the general hard washing, hard slapping, and hard struggles for the mastery between the poor striving mother and her necessarily neglected children. What time has she, or what means have they, to make clothes for the babies? They are clean only once a week, and how do they clothe themselves, these London poor? my readers may ask. There are in very dirty streets and close thoroughfares small shops, called marine stores. At these places, in addition to dripping, grease, and kitchen stuff', corks, bits of iron, copper, and old metal pots, bottles and empty boxes, children's old clothes sometimes are offered for sale, and are resold at a very low price. Besides these places there are small pawn shops and "leaving shops" everywhere. Here raiment of all sorts, large and small, can be purchased. The mother can fit herself out, and her husband too, at these shops; but they pay dear for the cheap article, as the children's clothes are often filled with infection, and indeed must be. The poor in London live sometimes by pawning one thing after another, through a hard winter, or under stress of sickness. The clothes of the child just dead of typhus fever are taken to the pawnshop, and turned into money. A drunken wife or mother will take the blankets and sheets from her dead husband's bed, and pawn them. This husband, perhaps, has died of small pox. A woman who goes to help at a gentleman's house, after a dinner party, may be often rewarded for clandestine services to the cook by a faded stuff or cotton dress. I should think there is hardly a charwoman coming backwards and forwards to help the cook on occasions like these, who could not tell us this was the reward she received for the gin she procured and the dripping she sold, without any consideration of the best scraps and unlawfully large pieces of bread and meat which some cooks, more generous than just, "give them out of charity," thereby ignoring the validity of the eighth commandment in respect of their own consciences.

There is one more emporium for wearing apparel open to the poor mothers, besides the pawnshop and marine-store shop. This is the redoubtable tally-shop. At these shops the poor spend more money than they can righteously afford. These shopmen take weekly payments. By the time the last three pence or sixpence is paid, the new dress has already a more than shabby appearance.

These made-up and unmade dresses and coats have a showy and plausible look about them, and the wife and elder daughter, ever anxious to be as well-dressed as their neighbours, buy the mantle or whatever they fancy, on the ground of not having to pay down for the "sweet thing," and reckon on the chances of an increase of work in fair weather, but not on the likelihood of sickness coming amongst them to straiten their

little incomes, if not to cut them off entirely. I consider the tally- shops sources of vanity to any poor family, and I even prefer the pawn-shop and marine- store establishment to these tricky places of debit and credit. It has often astonished me how the very poorest part of our population manage to keep themselves in any description of clothing; but their means and appliances in this respect are often unique. A year or two ago, I read in one of our Missionary Reports of a woman keeping herself in shoe- leather by the sale of corks (probably to the marine-store dealer), which she from time to time picked out of the rubbish heaps at High- gate. I never see a stray cork in my path, but I think of that thrifty dust-rummager. What becomes of all the pins we drop out of our dresses, &c., might be a subject for speculation to ladies; and what can become of the hair-pins we lose out of our back-hair? We sow them about the house, garden, and our usual whereabouts, but they never seem to come to light again, once dropped. Our maid "has not seen them about the floor," and "has not picked them up." Is it not within the range of probability that some day our missionary may find out a worthy itinerant who has discovered the colony of stray hair-pins, and is keeping herself in bonnets by her researches into our impenetrable mystery, I proposed to paste pictures on to brown holland rolls for children. Shall I tell you a truth concerning the amusements of small children in our parish, rather too small to run about the streets alone, and who are too young to attend school unless a bigger child can accompany them to the infants' school, and _ sit by them while there (for we occasionally take a baby child in with its elder brother or sister, who are scholars)? These little creatures never know what it is to possess a legitimate plaything. A broken shovel or knife, and lid of a tin saucepan, are their ordinary toys. A few months ago, I went into a remarkably dirty house, and in one of the rooms, tenanted by a slovenly woman and four children, I saw on a large bedstead a child, eighteen months old; his features were so begrimed with black dirt, that he looked quite a little ruffian, and hardly human, as his thick, long hair hung matted over his forehead and about his cheeks. In his left hand he held upright, like a sword or sceptre, a long, rusty, but unbroken earring- knife! I asked his mother if he would not hurt himself with such a dangerous plaything. "No, mum," she replied; "I don't think he'll hurt himself. He's routed that out o' the dust 'olo this mornin', and he's been very busy with it ever since — ain't you, dear! "

I left him motionless on the bed, staring after me like a little wild animal, with his carving-knife still erect. The mother did not take it away, and I dare say, if it has not yet run into him (while his mother is busy and he himself is fractious and requires diversion), he still continues to sit upon the bed with his carving-knife!

Another of his brethren, perhaps, relieves- guard with a shovel, or saucepan, in his turn of tantrums. Surely, some of our own children's broken toys would be more eligible than these dangerous implements of amusement! A bigger child will amuse itself by poring over a low paper filled with vile pictures, and portraits of personages and actors in scenes which our own never heard of, much less read of. When the baby boy is troublesome to manage, one of these wretched papers is held out before his gaze, and he is diverted or frightened out of his rages by the edifying spectacle of the execution of the pirates, or something of a like complexion. Give him a few of your old toys, and the small London pauper will want to play with neither carving-knife nor shovel, and will be cleaner and better tempered in his bed, as his visits to the dust-hole in quest of playthings will be no longer necessary. Pictures of sacred subjects are highly valued by the poor, and, as I have before observed, especially among the old women who cannot read. Some of our old women possess the most extraordinary executions of art anywhere to be seen. How they come by them I cannot tell, for some are foreign; picture and frame too. One of my old ladies has a rude daub of the Crucifixion, in an old carved frame. At the base is written: " Es ist Vollgebracht." I have seen another of the same subject, but a better production in the way of art, and I understood it was a gift from a young lady. The owners do not always know how these precious relics came to them; they are very fond of these and their chimney- ornaments, and even when starving will neither pawn nor sell them. One old woman told me she hides them when the " hofficer," as she calls him, comes from the workhouse to spy out the nakedness of the land. " One day, mum, he see'd them, and said, ' Why don't you turn these into bread?' I'd rather lie here and starve, mum, I would; and when he comes again, I'll be bound he don't see 'em no more." She said this to me, crying and moaning, as if they were her grandchildren that she had been ordered to consume for food. She tells me " she watches 'em at night, and they quite talk to her when she can't sleep " and has her rushlight burning on the table. A plaster cast, the size of a new-born baby, stands on her mantel-piece, and always looks as if it would fall on her old head some day. It is meant for Napoleon I. The uniform is picked out in green and red; the best part of the white figure is the cocked hat. It has been her property some years, and is unbroken.

She had been drawing my attention to her pictures and little figures on the mantel-piece, and telling me what they were; at last I said,

" Well, who is that figure at the end? "

" Oh, he's either the Dook, Bonyparty, or Nelson, I don't know which; but he's one of 'em, I know."

I satisfied her for the time he was " Bonyparty." But she will not bear this in mind; she has been so long a time vague in her ideas respecting the identity of this plaster gentleman. The aged live in the past, the aged poor especially. The impressions of youth alone are ineffaceable. Were any one to morrow to ask her who it was, she would go through with her heroes again, and finish with " I don't know which, but it's one of 'em."

Most families have a large amount of what we designate as rubbish and lumber in the old dark cupboards and attics in their houses, and though our corks and hair-pins may not turn up in these local dust-heaps, many a trifle, of no value to ourselves, may be picked out and sent off to dress the mantel piece and divert the listless sick woman and child in the dwellings of our London poor. New scraps of velvet, silk and cloth, ends of ribbon, spare beads, &c., such as many among us throw away as useless cuttings after we have completed some piece of fancy work, may be saved, with much advantage, for the use of our poor women and children.

There are invalids who are too feeble to maintain a livelihood by rough work, such as charring, washing, and ironing all day long. These sit at home and make up fancy articles, such as needle-books, pin-cushions, and pen wipers, to sell in the streets or at the different shops and bazaars. I know one old widow afflicted with dropsy and a bad leg. The parish allows her one shilling and six pence and a loaf per week. The one shilling and sixpence does not pay the rent of her tiny dark back room, which costs her two shillings weekly. She has now and then a bad attack of illness, and her work, of course, stands still, and we keep her from starving by parochial relief. When able to go about, she makes pincushions and pen wipers out of cloth and beads, and hawks them about the street; but she is known in the neighbourhood, and the servants grow tired and irritated at being often called up in the middle of their work to a basket of pen-wipers, and she tells me the door is now and then " at once " banged in her face, and that's all. "You see, mum, I can't get further off to sell. They get tired of me hereabouts," is her universal complaint. She buys the cloth and velvet out of which she cuts her pen-wipers, at eight pence per pound, in the Jew's cloth market, on a Thursday, in Shoreditch. She is obliged to go there in an omnibus. The fare is eight-pence (four-pence there and back), then she has to buy the beads and braiding for the fancy embroidery of the little wares elsewhere. She is by no means happy in her designs, bringing me elephants, tulips, Turkish caps, tea-pots, and blue-coat boys, to inspect and get sold for her when she is about to be laid up, and can't crawl about. As I have had these things on my hands now and then, and cannot sell them, I have

remonstrated with her on her erroneous taste, but with slight success.

" Why don't you make them all of one sort, as most of my friends prefer the simpler cloth ones, and not those silly tulips and dolls and tea-pots! "

" Well, mum," was her reply; "you see it's taste, it is. I can sell them tea-pots very well, and I walked down to King Edward's School o' purpose to dress them dolls like the scholars, and that's the beauty of them; it's the dress exact, and I have taken many a four-pence on 'em, I have, mum; and you must have something to 'tract the eye when you open your bundle, you know, mum. It wouldn't do to take them plain ones along the street! " She never exceeds sixpence in her charges for these pen wipers, and most of them are four-pence. The only six-penny ones are scarlet cloth, with white mice "couchant," and made of white plush. She tells me she finds these more expensive than the others to make up. I have seen them sold at the bazaars for one shilling and sixpence. This poor woman has lived on the sale of her pin-cushions for the last ten or twelve years.

I have endeavoured, to the best of my ability in this little space of matter, to give a faithful sketch of our industrious, struggling London poor in the homos with which I am familiar. There are dens of misery and crime in the heart of the City, and on the opposite side of the Thames, which I admit to be beyond my ken. In these dens are men and women and children, viler than the animals they drive, where each day and night that rises and falls on their wretched existence is fraught with deeper and blacker crime and terror than in the times of Pagan darkness, before the light of Christianity was diffused throughout our island home. I know that among us there are helpers for their miserable condition, such as City Missionaries, and a band of women whom we may find in every nook and corner of the earth, and who seek their happiness in rooting out sin and sorrow from among the lowest and most degraded classes of the Lon don poor. Of these poor I know but very little. Occasionally a few of them come to settle in our district, and they are the curse of their more respectable neighbours. Their manner of life and occupations being such, I am doubtful whether they would appreciate our efforts to clothe their children.

I have tried my system, and found it success ful in my own place. The poor are grateful for benefits if rightly dealt out, and in London they are keenly susceptible of kindness shown them by their betters. But they are totally a different race of beings to the country poor. The latter take the tone and opinions of their lords and masters, and live more narrowly, in a moral sense, than the Londoners, who depend for subsistence

wholly upon the works of their own hands and the exercise of their own wits, amenable only to the bad or good luck of the times.

They are not the sorry slaves of local prejudices and local interests, they are men and women of the earth alone, in the rough or smooth walks of existence, just according as they may chance to be placed. For my own part, I would rather deal with them than the country folk, though the work of a London district is far more difficult than that of a country parish. "Human nature is the same everywhere," people will say, but there is much to combat with in our visiting; and when the fight is over, and the day's work done, the reflection that a handful of good seed has been sown, and is likely to produce a good return, amply repays the toil and moil a visitor may be obliged to go through all the year round. The blessing of the poor is always desirable; and I am convinced every English girl, whether she be the blue-veined daughter of our Belgravian homes, or the simple gentlewoman in a humbler neighbourhood, like our own, would be proud and happy to call down such a blessing on her own head as I have heard bestowed by poor mothers on those who have cheered and amused the little sick children by a few trifles saved out of a nursery, toy stock, and clothed others as well by the work of their own hands.

Abler pens than mine have written, and will write, I have little doubt, on the condition of the London poor. My paper is but a simple effort of my own to invite the attention of my sex to the cause I have at heart — united labour at home every day on their behalf: and if any one of my readers resents the idea of turning sempstress on their account, I would only remind her that none of us were ever born for our own pride and enjoyment, or for ourselves at all. We were all born to work through life, and our industry should be devoted to the service of one who in the next life will demand a return of our labour; and if we clothe the children of our poor, we do good, not only to the least of his little ones, but unto Him — the one Master of both them and us.

Clare, 1864.